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## THE PLACE OF COLERIDGE IN ENGLISH THEOLOGY

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John Stuart Mill once declared that Coleridge and Jeremy Bentham were the two creative minds in the English thought of their time.<sup>1</sup> It was characteristic of Mill to take the impartial standpoint from which such dissimilar thinkers could be likened in originality and eminence. One fears that neither of them could have been equally dispassionate in judging the other, and it would be hard to say which would have felt the deeper resentment if he could have foreseen the company in which he was to be placed. The period to which they belong was not rich in speculative talent so far as England was concerned, and few will dispute the justice of Mill's compliment to the two men who really left an enduring mark. It will be the purpose of this article to look at Coleridge in his special relation to the progress of theology, an aspect of his writings by which he would himself beyond all doubt have been most anxious to be appreciated. Julius Hare declared that by his work in this field he had shown himself "the true sovereign of modern English thought."<sup>2</sup> Kingsley at his moment of

<sup>1</sup> *Dissertations*, Vol. I, p. 393.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Life of Coleridge*, by Dykes Campbell, p. 256.

deepest doubt on religious matters received *Aids to Reflection* with "utter delight."<sup>3</sup> The leaders of the Cambridge Apostles — particularly Maurice and Sterling — could find no words to express their indebtedness but those which St. Paul judged fitting in Philemon towards himself, and acknowledged that they owed to Coleridge their very souls.<sup>4</sup> But while all are agreed that his influence was significant, perhaps beyond that of any one else, upon the development of thinking at that time in the English Church, there are reasons which make his precise place somewhat difficult to specify.

Perhaps his enigmatic character is best evidenced by the variety of reproaches to which he has been subjected. The Evangelical, who thinks that all scepticism had its root in Germany, can never forgive the man who was a pioneer in introducing the Kantian *Religionsphilosophie*. Ever since Hegel has proved so dubious an ally for Christian theologians, those writers who have translated the language of dogma into the technical terms of Teutonic metaphysics have been looked upon with suspicion, and of these Coleridge was among the chief.<sup>5</sup> The brilliant Oriel group at Oxford in the twenties of the last century detected in him a dangerous "mistiness," which had to be met by making doctrine clear-cut, lest heresy should take refuge in ambiguities. They felt called upon, like an early Church Council, not merely to hold the truth but to define it, and they had such men as Coleridge in view when they feared that divine philosophy might become procuress to the lords of hell. On the other hand our poet has been profusely vituperated on just the opposite ground. Carlyle accused him of having laid a speculative basis for the return to superstition. "He was thought to hold, he alone in England, the key

<sup>3</sup> Charles Kingsley: *Letters and Memories of his Life*, Vol. I, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Prefatory Memoir of John Sterling in *Essays and Tales*, by J. S., I, xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Yeast, Chap. III, "He [the vicar] told me, hearing me quote Schiller, to beware of the Germans, for they were all pantheists at heart."

of German and other Transcendentalisms; knew the sublime secret of believing by 'the Reason' what 'the Understanding' had been obliged to fling out as incredible; and could still, after Hume and Voltaire had done their best and their worst with him, profess himself an orthodox Christian, and say and print to the Church of England, with its singular old rubrics and surplices at Allhallowtide, *Esto perpetua*." <sup>6</sup> Coleridge's apologetic work was summarized as an appeal to "transcendental life-preservers." When we remember the reverence which Carlyle had himself expressed in his paper on Novalis for just this distinction of Reason and Understanding, we cannot but smile at his change of front, and realize how the *odium theologicum* may appear in an unexpected quarter. The prophet of Cheyne Row, like the Rev. Francis Eden in Charles Reade's romance, <sup>7</sup> liked people to think for themselves, and to end by thinking with him. Finally, Newman combined in a curious way both these criticisms on the philosopher-poet. He found him often heathen rather than Christian in his conclusions, yet the author of a regeneration in philosophy, which led his age nearer to Catholic truth. <sup>8</sup> The present article will attempt to bring together the chief passages by which Coleridge's position on matters of faith may be defined; and while it is hopeless to estimate just what his influence was, we may judge what it ought to have been for those who understood him.

## I

He flourished in a period marked, so far as England was concerned, by extreme theological stagnation. The last great debate had been on deism, and Coleridge was just emerging from boyhood when Burke was able to boast that the deistic writers had been gathered

<sup>6</sup> Life of Sterling, Chap. VIII.

<sup>7</sup> Never Too Late to Mend.

<sup>8</sup> Apologia, p. 93.

to the vault of all the Capulets, appealing for corroboration of his statement to the London book-sellers.<sup>9</sup> The time when pamphlet had followed pamphlet, when theologian and anti-theologian had stood—as Mark Pattison wittily put it<sup>10</sup>—*et cantare pares et respondere parati*, was far in the distance. It was held, not without reason, that the orthodox champions had been dialectically victorious; that Berkeley, Butler, and Bentley had far outgeneralled poor Tindal and Chubb and Collins. The inference was indeed somewhat rashly drawn that the discomfiture of these heretics meant the final abolition of their heresy. But for the time the intellectual triumph of the Church was complete. It was possible to write on Butler's *Analogy*, "This is the sword that slew deism." Especially after the French Revolution few Englishmen would call themselves freethinkers, lest they might be classed with Hébert and Fouquier Tinville. Even the so-called "pious deists" were afraid of being reminded that Robespierre had made an unctuous oration on *Être Suprême*. The rampant unbelief of Dr. Johnson's time had to hide its head, and the only respectable opinion to promulgate was that the questions of religion were at length *res iudicatae*. James Anthony Froude, looking back upon this period, spoke of it as exhibiting ecclesiastical healthiness, when problems of faith were no longer discussed, when Christianity had so wrought itself into men's natures that it was no more in need of being debated than the movements of the planets or the changes of the seasons.<sup>11</sup> Contrasting it with the stormy Tractarianism which was so soon to follow, he deplored the change which led men no longer to use the sun of the religious firmament as a light to their steps, but to begin looking *at* the sun till their eyes were dazzled. No controversial sermons investi-

<sup>9</sup> Reflections.

<sup>10</sup> Essays and Reviews, p. 296.

<sup>11</sup> Letters on the Oxford Counter-Reformation, in Short Studies, IV.

gated once a week whether the Evangelists had been guilty of perjury. No more books appeared like Sherlock's *Trial of the Witnesses*. The social prestige of the Establishment was jealously guarded as a guarantee of order. For the convulsion in France had cemented the alliance of morality with religion for the English mind, and, like Mr. Thwackum in *Tom Jones*, when men spoke of religion they meant the Christian religion, and by the Christian religion they meant the Protestant religion, and by the Protestant religion they meant the religion of the Church of England.

One must not indeed forget that this was the period of Paley, and that the *Bridgewater Treatises*, whose ingenious learning he did so much to inspire, were almost in sight. Far less than justice is now done to those somewhat hard and unemotional reasoners who gave to the first generation of the last century the Argument from Design. But Paley with all his gifts was the inheritor of a bad tradition. The spirit of forensic debate still lingered; the subtle archdeacon was as much a pugilist of the faith as any knight of chivalry, and it is perhaps the thought of him which makes us appreciate Sir William Hamilton's odd term "theological prowess."<sup>12</sup> The times of deism had been rationalistic not more in respect of the assaults to which Christianity had been subjected than in respect of the defenses which had been offered on its behalf. One side was concerned with the destruction, the other with the support of an *external* religious authority; the day when men were to speak of a testimony within, of a "Spirit bearing witness with our spirits" was not yet. The whole effort of apologetic was to rise to the height of a great *argument*, to buttress the Christian mysteries with "evidence," so to state a case authenticated by miracle and backed

<sup>12</sup> Used in an article in the *Edinburgh Review*, Oct. 1836, On the Conditions of Classical Learning.

by prophecy that a man must either own himself convinced or bear the reproach of being a dunce. The appeal of religion was deliberately intellectualized, so that it might be equally impressive to the faithful and the faithless. But though hard knocks might thus be given to unbelief, though men might even be coerced into a sullen acquiescence, the positive result was as disappointing as it deserved to be. Coleridge anticipated the tedium and the revolt with which our age looks back on such a conflict. And the extravagances of misapplied subtlety into which the discussions on Design were apt to run seem to us today almost incredible. Perhaps the most absurd came from Germany. In 1761 Süssmilch—quoted so profusely by Malthus—had published a work called *Göttliche Ordnung* in which he bade us meditate upon the Divine foresight by which the growth of trees had been stopped lest they should inconvenience mankind by pushing their branches into the sky! And if any one found an intellectual stumbling-block in the immense stretch of life which was ascribed to the antediluvians, Süssmilch had to point out that the earth was then almost empty, that the enormous families of a single parent provided a quick method by which it might be filled up, and that, as population grew, the Divine watchfulness was shown in the progressive curtailment of that span of days by which the contrary danger threatened to be incurred! The services of such an analogy to the social message which Malthus had to preach are obvious; its religious value is not so clear. But one sees something like it in that extraordinary support to drooping faith which Paley drew from the adjustments of the human throat. It appears that a delicate mechanism there secures this result, that the eater though constantly on the point of being suffocated during a meal almost always saves himself in time. In a city feast, for example, what

deglutition, what anhelation! Yet . . . not two guests are choked in a century."<sup>13</sup> Newman scarcely caricatures such reasoners when he said that they kept presenting an arithmetical alternative, "Three chances to one for revelation, and only two chances against it."<sup>14</sup> A great deal in the *Bridgewater Treatises*, about the hand, about digestion, about the stars, was of the same order of thought.

One of the more melancholy effects of this intellectualist temper was seen strangely enough in a field where intellect was professedly despised, and where the pride of reason was held a heinous iniquity. The notion that God was perpetually interfering with mechanical nature for purposes which a superficial human scrutiny could assign, showed itself in the confident detecting of particular providences, and in the assurance with which the ill fortune of individuals was traced to personal sins which the preacher or the religious writer could name. The Saints of the Desert did not move in a more vivid environment of angels and devils than did some Evangelicals and very especially the Methodists of a hundred years ago. No regard whatever seems to have been paid to that Scripture which warned against a hasty reprobation of those on whom the Tower of Siloam fell, or those whose blood Pilate mingled with the sacrifices. The habitual illustrations of a Methodist magazine were from the fearful fate by which A. B. or C. D. had been overtaken on his way from a dance or a card-party. The keeping of the Sabbath was seldom enforced without some such fearsome tale as that of a man, known to the district, who had reaped his corn on the day of worship, but of whom a lightning flash had made a solemn example as he closed his barn door.<sup>15</sup> The appalling belief of the twelfth century

<sup>13</sup> Natural Theology, Chap. X.

<sup>14</sup> Tracts for the Times, No. 85.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Sydney Smith's article "Methodism" in the *Edinburgh Review*, where a multitude of illustrations is collected.



that a man might so offend the Most High as to have his deathbed beset by the tempting voices of fiends, lest devout thoughts should have a chance to cheat the judgment through a belated repentance, hardly went beyond that doctrine of a judicial hardening of heart by which the pious only three generations ago did such dishonor to the Father of mankind. This was the dark theological side of that Dissent which won such deserved gratitude by the practical enthusiasms of a Clarkson, a Wilberforce, or an Elizabeth Fry, and such deserved admiration by the glowing eloquence of a Robert Hall. Truly the disregard of speculative thinking on religion and the diversion of trained minds to other pursuits had a less wholesome outcome than Froude has told us.

"Chapel folk be more hand-in-glove with them above than we,"<sup>16</sup> says one of Mr. Hardy's Anglican villagers. It was plainly true of Dissent in the time of Coleridge. Side by side with this claim of intimacy in the Divine counsels went the usual confident interpretation of the predictive parts of Scripture, and the usual certitude that judgments were there foreshadowed upon those whom the interpreter disapproved. In a measure this was true of the Evangelical party within the Establishment. Like Joseph in *Wuthering Heights*, they ransacked the Bible to rake the promises to themselves and fling the curses on their neighbors. The sermons of Dr. Cumming were unfortunately typical of no small section among the nonconformists, and though they are themselves forgotten, the terrific critique by George Eliot in the *Westminster Review* preserves the author to a merciless immortality. The Pope was the Man of Sin. Cardinal Wiseman was the unclean spirit. The French were the frogs of the Apocalypse. The beast out of the abyss, the scorpions whose sting was in their tails, the lying prophet, and the horn that had eyes, were all

<sup>16</sup> Far from the Madding Crowd, Chap. XLII.

dogmatically identified with contemporary persons. If, wrote George Eliot, an Evangelical preacher wished to have the avenues to his church as crowded as the passages to the opera, "let him rival Moore's Almanac in the prediction of political events, tickling the ears of his hearers who are but moderately spiritual by showing how the Holy Spirit has dictated problems and charades for their benefit."<sup>17</sup> Cumming indeed was scarcely beginning to be known at the date of Coleridge's death, but he is an admirable example of that tone in the exegesis of the prophets against which the *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* was a far-seeing, but for him at least an ineffectual protest. Nor were the soothsayers apparently at all abashed by the circumstance that their successive predictions had been from age to age in close harmony with the political passions of the time, growing with their growth and disappearing with their disappearance.

In two widely different quarters, however, a token had shown itself of better things in British theology. One was the little group of historically minded clergymen at Oxford, of whom Whately was chief, and whose work was to be developed by Thirlwall and Arnold. The other was a secluded Scottish manse, where Erskine of Linlathen was exposing himself to the persecution by which ideas beyond the age are uniformly heralded. It was perhaps Niebuhr's rewriting of Roman history which suggested to Whately, as it undoubtedly did to Arnold, that the historical documents of the Old and New Testaments could only be understood by reconstructing the environment in which they first appeared. In 1825 Thirlwall had accompanied his translation of Schleiermacher's *Essay on St. Luke* with a preface in which the impossibility of verbal inspiration was, almost for the first time, expounded with competence to the

<sup>17</sup> Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming; in George Eliot's Essays.

English mind. Three years later Whately issued his work *On the Difficulty of St. Paul's Writings*, where the same point was driven home. The timorous feared that the destructive side of all this would be more potent than the attempts at rebuilding. Certainly so far as Thirlwall was concerned, though he became afterwards a bishop, one may doubt whether inspiration of any sort was ever seriously considered by that accomplished scholar. But in Erskine's *Remarks on the Internal Evidence for Revealed Religion*, published as early as 1820, we have the germ of the great rejuvenescence. It was by Erskine and Coleridge combined that the new ideas in Biblical Criticism, which might so easily have taken — and for so many actually did take — a purely negative direction, were fertilized and Christianized.

But on the whole Froude is undoubtedly right when he speaks of the period just before Tractarianism as disclaiming theology altogether. His sanguine inference that people were averse to discussions on dogma because faith was so completely established is, however, one upon which a lurid light is cast by contemporary literature, and by the literature of a few years afterwards in which that society has been portrayed. When men repudiate the obligation to think, in order that they may more energetically practise, the sluggards in intellect turn out as a rule to be sluggards also in duty. The average clergyman was a squire in holy orders. He brought with him into the Church those qualities, both good and bad, which belonged to squiredom; on the one hand polite manners, sportsmanship, hospitality, interest of a condescending sort in the "lower and middling classes"; on the other hand mental torpor, insular narrowness, complete ignorance — as Carlyle would have said — as to "what o'clock it was in the thought of Europe." Trollope speaks of the reproach that the Establishment was affording "easy couches to worn-

out clerical voluptuaries.”<sup>18</sup> Cobbett declared that from the pen of his own leisure hours he had addressed more sermons to the poor than their appointed guides had given them in half a century, though the Church drew so great a part of her revenues from the salt of the laboring man.<sup>19</sup> The earnest side of Wesleyanism, if it was no longer denounced in the strain of Parson Trulliber for menacing the ecclesiastical temporalities, had to bear many an elegant rebuke from writers like Sydney Smith for the sin of “enthusiasm.” That zeal, which was supposed to be allowed a period of remission because of a blessed agreement about the objects of faith, when it forsook theological studies was turned into any path rather than the application of truth to the needs of life. The scholarship which was withdrawn from elucidating dogma, became absorbed in the annotating of classical texts. Disraeli was not quite a fanatic for holiness, but it was he who wrote as follows: “A priest is scarcely deemed in our days a fit successor to the authors of the Gospels, if he be not the editor of a Greek play; and he who follows St. Paul must now at least have been private tutor of some young nobleman who has taken a good degree.”<sup>20</sup> Not even the Tractarians themselves in their denunciation of ecclesiastical worldliness could have improved upon the mordant satire addressed by Fakr-edeem to the Lady of Bethany: “The English are neither Jews nor Christians, but follow a sort of religion of their own, which is made every year by their bishops, one of whom they have sent to Jerusalem, in what they call a parliament, a college of muftis.”<sup>21</sup>

It is needless to say that these features, ecclesiastical and religious, of the England of a hundred years ago marked only a part of the State Church, and that an

<sup>18</sup> Barchester Towers, Chap. XLIII.

<sup>19</sup> Rural Rides, I, 42.

<sup>20</sup> Coningsby, VII, iii. Cf. Archdeacon Grantly in Barchester Towers, “Even the Greek play bishops were better than this.”

<sup>21</sup> Tancred, III, v.

impartial picture would have to set other qualities in relief. But the abuses were sufficiently prevalent to attract a great deal of reproach, and I have selected those which the work of Coleridge was intended to correct.

## II

On the speculative side he entered an earnest protest against anti-rationalism on the one hand and ultra-rationalism on the other. He mediated between the two, not, like so many mediators, by suggesting a wretched compromise in which what is good in each extreme has been sacrificed to a hollow agreement. He indicated a real synthesis in which both were conserved, and the outcome of his influence was to give English theology a direction which it has never since lost.

We have seen that the problem of the eighteenth century had been how to deal with the mysterious element in revelation. The deists had said that genuine religious truth is wholly discoverable by the intelligence of man, and that all beyond this is *Aberglaube*. Their opponents had replied that not everything in religion is consonant with intelligence, that there is a body of dogma which even contradicts reason, and yet must be accepted, for it has come to us on the authority of Him whose supernatural person was attested by miracle. For Coleridge both these views contained a truth and both contained a falsehood. The Church apologists were wrong when they said that the irrational might have such external credentials that criticism must be silenced. The deists were wrong in that they confounded Reason with reasoning, supposed that the true can always be "understood" by the human mind, or that to "understand" a statement is a pre-requisite of believing it. The solution lay in distinguishing Reason from Understanding as faculties different in

kind. The latter was applicable to things of sense, the former to the supra-sensible.

This antithesis was clearly borrowed from Kant. But Coleridge professed to have found it in other quarters as well. Reason was the *siccum lumen* of Bacon.<sup>22</sup> It was the "intuitive" faculty which together with the "discursive" — according to Milton's Raphael<sup>23</sup> — constituted the double mode of action of the soul. It was that "pure intelligence" of which John Smith the Platonist had said that we are not identical with it, though we partake of it; we have it *κατὰ μέθεξιν* and not *κατ' οὐσίην*. It was what St. Paul himself had in view when he contrasted the spiritual mind with the carnal mind.<sup>24</sup> Coleridge suggests here a simple analogy drawn from the two ways in which a truth of geometry may come to be received. One may find by actual measurement that all the triangles he has ever drawn have two sides together greater than the third. Or one may *prove* from a single diagram that this relation among the sides *must always* be valid.<sup>25</sup> In the former case Understanding has been exercised, in the latter case Reason. The difference is between empirical evidence which deals with data of sense and rational inference which uses sense merely as a help to conclusions about a supra-sensible concept. For the abstract lines and figures of geometry may be conceived, but cannot be perceived. Plainly Kant's use of the word "Understanding," however suggestive Coleridge may have found it, is here widely departed from.

Now — so runs the argument — that which is dealt with in the moral and spiritual sphere is always, like the geometrical point or line, an object of the trans-experiential kind. Mere tabulations of observed sequence or co-existence will give only empirical rules, such as might

<sup>22</sup> Aids to Reflection, p. 159 seq. Cf. The Friend, I, 206–217.

<sup>23</sup> Paradise Lost, Bk. V.

<sup>24</sup> Aids to Reflection, p. 192.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

be got in geometry by drawing figure after figure and taking actual measurements. Such treatment of the rules of conduct will reduce morality to a scheme of prudence, and the Greek sophists had so reduced it in the days of Plato.<sup>26</sup> They had confounded a principle with the particular acts in which the principle manifests itself or by which it may be illustrated, and for those who know the difference between a law of necessity and a statement of uniformity they had been landed in ethical scepticism. So true is it that "by celestial observations alone can even terrestrial charts be constructed scientifically."<sup>27</sup>

Hence arose Coleridge's impatience with the theistic proofs, and with all pretended demonstrations from facts of "experience" to a reality beyond experience. For the experience relied upon either involved, to begin with, an assumption outside itself, or else it could never conduct us thither by cause and effect reasoning. Suppose one aims to *prove* a Supreme Being, to reason "from Nature up to Nature's God." God then becomes simply a link in the chain of causation, similar in kind to the other links if the argument is to have real continuity.

For there must be no stealthy *μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος*. Thus for religious purposes you demonstrate either too much or too little; too little if you reach a mere finite Mechanician, too much if the *Causa Sui et Mundi* becomes a mere name for the natural order itself.<sup>28</sup> There was indeed a certain sense in which the idea of God was implicit in every act of thought, the same sense in which infinite space was presupposed in all geometrical figures. But the nature of such underlying ground was left open. One could no more assume that the origin of all intelligence must be intelligent than that the source of organized life must be organized, or that the source of motion

<sup>26</sup> The Friend, II, iii.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Aids to Reflection, p. 135 seq.

must itself move.<sup>29</sup> And Coleridge found it hard by this line of thought to reconcile the basal ground of all being with the attribute of personality. For how could the Infinite be personal? For a long time his head was with Spinoza, though his heart was with St. Paul and St. John.<sup>30</sup> Yet the disasters of pure intellect, proving and disproving the same thing in succession, had at least the negative value of showing the intellect's incompetence in the realm of ultimates.<sup>31</sup> The constant re-appearance of religious conviction despite all theoretical discouragements was a hint that the real evidence was not purely intellectual, but was somehow bound up with states of will. And it was in Will that Kant had rightly found the Reason as distinct from the Understanding.

Our poet had no doubt indeed that intelligence was confirmatory of faith. He would have been completely sympathetic towards that exquisite simile of Wordsworth in which the intimations of God in nature are compared to those sonorous cadences which a child may hear in the "convolutions of a smooth-lipped shell," betokening

"mysterious union with its native sea,"

and bringing to him

"authentic tidings of invisible things."<sup>32</sup>

Very much the same idea is expressed in his own poem *The Æolian Harp*:

"And what if all of animated nature  
Be but organic harps diversely framed  
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
At once the Soul of each and God of All!"

<sup>29</sup> Biog. Lit., Chap. X. Was Coleridge here thinking of Shelley's lines (Revolt of Islam, VIII):

"What is that Power? Ye mock yourselves and give  
A human heart to what ye cannot know;  
As if the cause of life could think and live."

<sup>30</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Excursion, Bk. IV.



But Coleridge's ultimate basis of conviction remained moral, and no one is more free from that naïve anthropomorphism which would fashion the Eternal after the likeness of human intellect. He never speaks, after the intellectualist habit, of "God geometrizing," as Milton, for example, in a strangely crude passage has depicted the creation of the world with a pair of gigantic compasses for perfect precision in drawing the celestial circles.<sup>33</sup> He gives a much needed warning against the theological use of notions drawn from human jurisprudence.<sup>34</sup> And we owe to him one of the earliest known anticipations of Ritschl's doctrine that religious truth is not speculative, but given in judgments of value. Coleridge would have agreed with Newman's preference for such arguments upon immortality as did not appeal with equal force to Dives and to Lazarus.<sup>35</sup> Mathematical axioms he declared differ from moral axioms in that the former no man can deny while the latter no *good* man would deny. It was a fortunate inconsequence of our nature which thus called upon "the heart to rectify the errors of the understanding."<sup>36</sup> For a belief that was intellectually coercive would be spiritually ineffectual, and the assent that was compelled would lack the moral value of a venture of faith.<sup>37</sup> Our author boldly challenges the whole position of Paley, and invokes the support of Scripture itself when he asks whether miracles alone can work any true conviction in the human mind. "There are spiritual truths which must derive their evidence from within, which whoever rejects 'neither will he believe though a man were to rise from the dead' to confirm them. . . . What then can we think of a theological theory, which adopting a scheme of prudential legality, common to it with 'the sty of Epicurus' as far at least

<sup>33</sup> Paradise Lost, VII.

<sup>34</sup> Aids to Reflection, 99.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Grammar of Assent, Chap. VIII.

<sup>36</sup> Biog. Lit., Chap. X.

<sup>37</sup> Loc. cit.

as the springs of action are concerned, makes its whole religion consist in the belief of miracles?"<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, Coleridge was very far indeed from either an unreflective intuitionism or a blind submissiveness to religious authority. He reminds the philosophers of "common sense" that while reason is to be reconciled to those judgments of the plain man about which they speak, it is no less needful that the judgments of the plain man shall be elevated into reason.<sup>39</sup> Indeed it is by his polemic against the anti-rationalists that Coleridge is best known. He held the knowledge of God to be no last conclusion of a syllogism, but this was just because He was the presupposition of *all* syllogizing. That which was assumed in every process of proof could not be directly given in any. But the same intuitive Moral Reason which ultimately constituted our guarantee of God's existence, must be the touchstone by which all alleged positive revelations of His character were to be judged. Coleridge was as certain as Plato of his *τύποι θεολογίας*, and he quotes with thorough approval that quaint passage from Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist, in which God is depicted as a sovereign who bows to the authority of his own courts of law. The King's Bench, said More, is in the reason, Equity in the conscience, the Common Pleas in the understanding, and the Exchequer in the prudence. To these tribunals God refers even His own causes, so that the ultimate standard is no arbitrary will, but the very Spirit of Truth. A sign or a miracle is at best but an interlining of the great statute-book, and we are not only excused but even prohibited from "receiving as the king's mandates aught that is not stamped with the Great Seal of the conscience and counter-signed by the reason."<sup>40</sup> Fanciful, per-

<sup>38</sup> The Friend, II, ii.

<sup>39</sup> Biog. Lit., Chap. XII. Cf. Sir W. Hamilton's famous analogy between common sense and the common law, as both requiring judicious interpretation (Notes on Reid).

<sup>40</sup> Aids to Reflection, 108.

haps, and very easily caricatured. Mansel would have been merciless to it. We should have had from him a paragraph of glowing rhetoric, pointing out that the anthropomorphism against which old Xenophanes protested had shown itself in a yet more absurd dress, and warning us not to conceive the rule of the Eternal after the likeness of our limited monarchies, or to impose upon the council chamber of heaven the pedantry of British constitutionalism. "In His Moral Attributes, no less than in the rest of His Infinite Being, God's judgments are unsearchable and His ways past finding out."<sup>41</sup> But it is More and Coleridge who speak here for the modern mind. When Frederick Maurice attacked Mansel with a vehemence which only his moral passion could excuse, it was Coleridge's teaching that inspired him. And, curiously enough, the writer against whom that passage of *Aids to Reflection* was directed, was separated from Mansel wide as the poles in all but this, that they alike erected the notion of a capricious Divine Will to which human wills, under threat of perdition, were required to conform. The so-called "theological utilitarianism" of Paley had differed from the secular utilitarianism of Bentham only in that it included among its sanctions the foreseen pleasures and pains of a future life.<sup>42</sup> The *ultima ratio* between God and man was the power of God to send man to hell, and under that penalty it behooved us to shape our moral ideas after the scriptural revelation. If the autonomous right of conscience is now a theological commonplace in the Reformed Churches, the credit for preaching it in England is due in no small degree to Coleridge.

<sup>41</sup> Bampton Lectures, Lect. VII.

<sup>42</sup> Coleridge's insistence that the moral reason is no mere complicated calculating of pleasures, and that this *intuitive* quality in conscience is the true ground of philosophic theism, shows remarkable prevision of a great debate that still rages. Cf. his very suggestive point that wherever genuine morality has given way to a scheme of ethics founded on utility its place is soon challenged by the spirit of *honor*. Yet honor is but "the shadow or ghost of virtue deceased" (The Friend, II, ii).

But perhaps his clearest and most definite service in this field was performed in his doctrine of Holy Scripture, both in his mordant criticism of verbal inspiration, and in his most sagacious hints of that sense in which the uniqueness of the sacred writings may be securely affirmed. There is a wealth of thought in the *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*—thought which was long lost upon a religious world still unfit to assimilate it, and afterwards regained with far less than the due meed of gratitude to the subtle mind that had been so far ahead of its time. Coleridge on Inspiration was like bread cast on the waters and found after many days.

The “generality of our popular divines,” he has told us, maintained the view that all parts of the Bible were equally inerrant, because equally dictated by the Supreme Being to a mechanical amanuensis. We may well believe him; for after two generations it was still heresy to suggest a different conception, and Bishop Colenso was made a martyr for free thought about the arithmetic of *Numbers*. The difficulties which Coleridge had to urge are the now familiar points of intelligent Biblical Criticism. They are such as these<sup>43</sup>: the *prima facie* differences in style and feeling from book to book—so natural if one assumes the active individuality of each writer, so inexplicable if one thinks of a single Author, to whom the human agents were like so many puppets to a ventriloquist; the *petitio principii* involved in “proving” inspiration from the statements of Scripture itself; the problem of defining how far the infallible guarantee extends—only to the Septuagint, or the New Testament? or to the Vulgate? or to the English translation?; the lineal descent of the received view from the Rabbinical worship of the Books of Moses and the exclusive claim of *θεοπνευστία* for these; the impossibility that infallible truth can be conveyed in our so fallible language; the perpetual miracle involved in safeguarding each

<sup>43</sup> *Confessions*, Letter II.

version; the discrepancies on matter of detail which were bound to occur when several historians narrated the same event, and which the "harmonists" explained away only by such forced hypotheses as suggested collusion; the extreme unlikelihood that to men so far apart as the authors of the Pentateuch and the authors of the Gospels the same maturity of teaching would be communicated; the desperate compulsion by which the literalists were bound to shackle all growing knowledge with ancient precedents, as when "Sir Matthew Hale sent a crazy old woman to the gallows in honour of the Witch of Endor."<sup>44</sup> But the overwhelming reason for seeking a more elastic doctrine was a *moral* reason. Only by supposing development was it possible to view the history of Israel as, in any sense at all, divinely guided. Coleridge quotes with horror the position of a divine who said that if Scripture applauded Jael for her treatment of Sisera this was good proof that Jael's morality was all that could be desired! He lays down the great principle that the Bible is to be looked upon as the Word of God because it is true and holy, not as true and holy because it is somehow antecedently known to be the Word of God. And he challenges the verbalists, as a crucial instance, to apply their view to the Book of Job, where if anywhere the free action of human minds upon a great spiritual problem is simply presented. Yet preachers did not scruple to take a text from the cynicism of Bildad the Shuhite, and unfold its meaning as the very voice of the Most High!

Writers like Whately and Thirlwall had already shaken the old orthodoxy in the same way. But Coleridge's contribution was far more positive, far more constructive, than theirs. He faced and answered the question: How much that is of religious value will be lost by abandoning this notion of inerrancy? Did men demand an infallible standard, saying with Chilling-

<sup>44</sup> Confessions, Letter IV.

worth that the Bible and the Bible alone is the religion of Protestants, and fearing that to give up papal authority without a new authority as a substitute was to relapse into anarchic subjectivism? Bossuet, he reminds us, had clearly shown that the sects of Protestantism were far indeed from being unified by this external rule, so that if unity were the interest that literalism was to guarantee it must be acknowledged a failure.

Was there then no genuine sense at all in which the inspiration of Scripture is unique? Coleridge answers that it has proved itself such, and continues to prove itself, by the unexampled fitness of the truth it makes known to our human nature and needs. It is only when read without the presupposition of being exceptional that its exceptional character becomes realized, and that experimentally. "Whatever *finds* me bears witness for itself that it has proceeded from a Holy Spirit."<sup>45</sup> By this attestation all history proclaimed that other books were to this one but as subordinate spiritual luminaries, that it alone shines by its own light, the ultimate manifestation of the Sun of Righteousness. It is to this thinker that we owe that most pregnant distinction which was to fill so great a place in later thought, the distinction between saying that Scripture *is* the word of God and that Scripture *contains* the word of God. Only on this basis could a truly historical and hence a credible view of the process of revelation be grounded.

### III

For Coleridge then the objects of faith are neither demonstrable by the theoretic intellect nor revealed by an authoritative oracle with miraculous guarantees of inerrancy. "The sciential reason," he said, "stands neutral."<sup>46</sup> It does not, for example, make coercive the

<sup>45</sup> Confessions, Letter I.

<sup>46</sup> Biog. Lit., Chap. X.

belief in a moral providence, but neither does it refute such a belief. It even becomes an effective ally by undermining with equal destructiveness the dogmatisms of denial. There is no theoretic consideration against the idea of God, "except its own sublimity."<sup>47</sup> But our real ground of vital conviction is not in the intellect; it is in "the law of conscience." We accept the Christian scheme because of its consonance with that spiritual attitude towards life which mankind in its highest development has reached. One might perhaps illustrate Coleridge's point by the remark of Leibnitz, that first truths are virtually though not literally innate, for the mind is predisposed to receive them, as the veins of a block of marble prefigure the coming statue. Just as intelligence is prepared by its very constitution for knowledge, so conscience is pre-adapted for Christian faith. In each case the latent and the tacit had to be made explicit and articulate.

To exhibit this in detail Coleridge defines carefully the characteristics of the spiritual principle in man as these disclose themselves to introspection, rejecting three hypotheses as not less inadequate to the facts of analysis than hostile to the claims of religion.<sup>48</sup> There is the materialism of Hobbes, which would make moral distinctions illusory and the quest for moral satisfaction meaningless. There is the optimism of Shaftesbury, which regards human nature as essentially good and the natural conscience as self-sufficing—a doctrine in which those of our race who know themselves most profoundly see least reason to trust, and which would plainly exclude as superfluous all supernatural aid. And there is the Calvinistic dogma of total corruption, by which the very existence of an upward impulse in mankind is made impossible; but if there is anything which moral history makes certain it is that such impulse

<sup>47</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>48</sup> *Aids to Reflection*, p. 92.

exists, and if there is any assumption which would turn religion into magic it is to suppose that the race could be redeemed without it. We cannot doubt either that we have aspirations of a spiritual kind, or that these aspirations are deeply perverted by what St. Paul called the "law in our members." If the soul is a mere aspect of the physical organization, morality is abolished. If the will is not radically diseased, it requires no healing from a higher power. If our degradation is absolute, the *nisus* after better things is gone, and, even though a miracle should in chosen cases restore it, the restoration would be an act of Divine caprice, the justice of God would disappear in the single attribute of power, and reverence would become a mere trembling before One who arbitrarily picked out a few for bliss and a multitude for misery. Against all three positions Coleridge affirms as Catholic truth, corroborated by Reason, that there is a distinctly spiritual principle in man, much distorted yet not essentially destroyed, capable of coöperating with the Supreme Power towards its own re-establishment as the guiding force of life.

Hence the fundamental and the wholly rational character of the Article on Original Sin. Not the belief in an omnipotent Creator of all things visible and invisible can be called the basis of Christianity; this belonged no less to Judaism, like the belief in the Moral Law, and — if we include the apocalyptic period of the Jewish faith — even the belief in a Resurrection and a Judgment. The specific elements in the Christian creed are such as assert salvation through an Incarnate Redeemer, repentance and faith as the means by which it is secured, the reception of a new principle of life, progressive grace through the Spirit, deliverance from the power of sin through the coöperative working of man's best nature and divine help. But at the root of all lies a true conception of the "natural" state of the soul.





It is a good example of Coleridge's claim for the right of conscience to pronounce upon dogma.

From this standpoint two positions are insisted upon: (1) that the roots of religion are universally present, and (2) that religion is never "natural" in the sense in which "natural" is contrasted with "revealed." Man as such, man in that respect which makes him to differ from the lower animals, is conscious of responsibility, of obligation, of good and evil as an intrinsic antithesis which cannot be dissolved into a difference of extrinsic consequences. Some one may, indeed, deny that such witness is given by his own consciousness; if so, it is not possible to refute him, but it is proper to disbelieve him. The hypochondriac may "find" in himself glass legs, but this does not alter the objective state of the case, and there is a common spiritual nature, just as there is a common physical arrangement. The moral consciousness is no mere eccentricity or peculiar privilege of a few. It is "the light that lighteneth *every* man who cometh into the world." And the objects of universal faith—God and a future state—are objects which our moral nature has found most congenial to its own aspirations to accept. Intellect cannot disprove them, conscience imperatively requires them. But to follow the deists, and to call this process "natural" is to forget that it comes from just that activity in man which is beyond "nature," beyond the "faculty that judges according to sense." It is an immediate intuition, and the instinct of the mystics about it was so far right. When the Fourth Gospel says that the Logos was made flesh and dwelt among us, when Heracleitus speaks of man's ordering his life by the λόγος within and sinning just in so far as he sets up a "private" judgment of his own, both are testifying that only by sharing God's image can God be known. "Evidences of Christianity! I am weary of the word. Make a man feel the want of it, rouse him, if you can, to the self-

knowledge of his need of it, and you may safely trust it to its own evidence." That which is the beginning of all argument cannot itself be argued to, just as the consciousness that "I am" is groundless only because it is the ground of all other certainty whatever.<sup>50</sup>

#### IV

We shall not pursue Coleridge's theological thought into further detail. Enough has been said to provide a basis for estimating his general import in the spiritual development of his age. One feature we should perhaps discount, for it may easily lead us to be more than just to his value as a thinker. The subtle seductions of the stylist were wonderfully at his command. He had the immense advantage of that poetic gift so rarely bestowed upon a theologian, and yet when present so effective in commending ideas upon the deep things of life. Poetry and religion have so many points at which they overlap, that imaginative splendor is apt to be mistaken for speculative insight. Shelley, for example, was no philosopher, although many an unforgettable verse on matters philosophic might suggest that he was. And Coleridge could seldom write more than a few pages together without some brilliance of fancy, some piercing comparison, some *callida iunctura* in the magic of words, that may or may not be accompanied with profoundness of thought, but in either case plausibly conveys to us that the author has seen very far. His biographer very happily remarks of him that when he had overcome the trials of his youth he was like another great poet not only in having his feet set on a rock and his goings established, but in discovering that a new song had been put in his mouth. It is not his verse alone that has poetic quality. In the *Biographia Litteraria*, the

<sup>50</sup> Biog. Lit., Chap. XII.

*Aids*, the *Confessions*, even the almost forgotten pages of *The Friend*, the same art is there, and while we delight in it we have to be on our guard against it. In judging him we must here ignore for the moment whatever belongs to the form, and think only of the significance of the matter.

He deserves immense credit for two things, first for his valiant though largely fruitless attempt to make Anglican theology philosophical, and second for his anticipation of the course which religious philosophy was to take in the period that was opening.

In 1852, twenty years after our poet's death, Sir William Hamilton observed of English divines that their ineffectual character was the result of a lack of philosophical training. They had not recognized the real field upon which the battle between faith and unbelief must be fought out. Hamilton feared that the incoming tide of certain foreign heresies would be but feebly met by a Church which had not thus prepared herself for resistance, blaming especially the universities—which had dropped the philosophical element from their discipline—for “this singular and dangerous disarmature.”<sup>51</sup> It was the characteristic weakness then as still of the Anglican Establishment, and it was just this weakness which Coleridge had striven with might and main to remedy. He had his effect on such men as Maurice, and his admirers may claim that but for him the ignorance of moving speculation would have been more widespread, that by his work, for example, a select few were made aware of the vast import of German thought. His was an isolated voice calling aloud for that recognition of dogmatics as a science which the Church of England to her incalculable loss has still so slightly yielded. Probably Scottish divines have profited far more by the impulse which he gave. Moreover, it is not too much to say that Coleridge had

<sup>51</sup> Discussions, p. 790.

the eye of a seer for the new direction which apologetic in the nineteenth century must take. The insistence upon internal rather than external evidence, the abandonment of cold rationalistic "proofs," the discernment that man's moral nature rather than his logical dexterity is the key to the position—in a word all that transformed statement of the appeal for the faith which deals in "values" rather than in "facts," found in him one of its first and most lucid exponents. It would be hard indeed after generations of later discussion to surpass his reconstructed doctrine of the authority of Scripture, so admirably balanced between servile submission on the one hand and lawless individualism on the other. And, unlike so many theorists whose own theories frighten them in the concrete application, he showed real courage in following out in detail the principles that he had once laid down.

It is perhaps a poor question to raise, and yet not without an interest of its own, how far Coleridge stands related to the various schools of our own time by which he has been either claimed or denounced. Very obviously and naturally he is quoted as a forerunner of the Broad Church. With by no means so clear evidence he has been called a herald of Tractarianism. The Anglo-Catholics said in their extreme way that he was more pagan than Christian. In the next twenty years it was by men whom they would have thought more pagan than Christian that his memory was cherished and his writings were pondered. Yet there must have been some substantial ground alike for Newman's tribute and for Carlyle's reproach.

We cannot make much of the point that the disparagement of understanding and the reinstatement of mystery gave a basis to those who looked upon free thought as sin, and who emphasized the mystic character of priest and sacrifice. Did not Carlyle himself speak incessantly

against the "rushlights of closet logic,"<sup>52</sup> against those who "dwell on the thin rind of the conscious,"<sup>53</sup> against the vain effort to escape from the primitive attitude of wonder? Did he not proclaim the principle of natural supernaturalism — an idea very near that of Coleridge — and thus remind us how the most bitter divisions are not between men who are in polar opposition but between men who are almost yet not altogether agreed? It is a far cry from the view that all Being is wrapped in mystery to the claim that a sacerdotal order holds the exclusive key by which these mysteries can be spiritually approached. If any one doubts the gulf between the author of *Aids to Reflection* and the authors of the *Tracts*, let him place side by side the chapter on Baptism in the former and Pusey's account of the same sacrament in the latter. Moreover, is there not just as much recognition of mystery, just as much restraint of intellect, in the *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Wesley's Journal* as Pusey himself could have desired?

The real kinship of Coleridge with the men of the Oxford Movement belongs to a very different side of his teaching, and what I take this to have been I shall indicate in a very few words. The *Tracts* were in the first instance a protest against regarding the Church as a mere public department, an "institution" amenable in every respect to State control, with officers who were sanctified civil servants, and whose future equally with that of the universities, the municipalities, and corporate bodies in general was to be decided by the House of Commons. They were aimed not so much against Evangelicalism, or even against theological Liberalism, as against Erastianism. For the Reform Government had made it clear that the Church was to be handled as just another citadel of "privilege." The bishops had been warned to set their house in order. And it was not only

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Sartor, *passim*.

<sup>53</sup> Essay on Diderot.

revenues that were threatened. The Church had her doctrine of apostolic succession and of the terms which make orders valid or invalid. Yet, by a diplomatic bargain concluded at the Foreign Office between Lord John Russell and the Prussian ambassador it was decided that a Protestant bishop of Jerusalem should be nominated alternately by the Anglican and the Lutheran communions. Two pliable prelates were indeed consulted and agreed, but the Church as a whole was not considered. "It was one of the blows that broke me," wrote Newman. The "Jerusalem Abomination," as the Anglo-Catholics called it, became the symbol of a statecraft which was to make the Church a tool of secular arrangements, and we who have seen nominations made to Sees by a premier who was sometimes a nonconformist and sometimes of no creed that can be specified—exercising his spiritual choice according to the political proclivities of each candidate—can understand the predictions of Keble's famous sermon on "National Apostasy." Even one who, like the present writer, sympathizes little with the doctrine of the *Tracts*, may agree whole-heartedly with the claim of spiritual independence which underlay them. It is by the monstrous denial of this claim that the assailants of Tractarianism so weaken their real case. And it was by Coleridge more perhaps than by any one else that the claim was clearly laid down.

For it was he, as one of his most discerning appreciators has told us, who asserted the view of the Church as "in its spiritual character first and foremost and above all things essentially a religious society of divine institution, not dependent on the creation or will of man or on the privileges or honours which man might think fit to bestow on it."<sup>54</sup> In short, he put life into the nominal creed. He believed in an organized and visible community which

<sup>54</sup> Dean Church, *The Oxford Movement*, p. 148.

had been founded by Christ and to which the perpetual inspiration of His Spirit was assured. He taught that Chillingworth was wrong in setting up a written book as the sole standard, that such Bibliolatry was little better than Romanism, that the promise of "guidance into all truth" was a promise with genuine and not negligible meaning. The Tractarians applied what he had said, with delight. Whether a Lutheran bishop should be recognized at Jerusalem was a point on which there might be difference of conviction, but at least it was not a matter for the judgment of Lord John Russell and Baron Bunsen, each with a single eye to diplomatic conveniences! Perhaps this opens up the whole problem of Church Establishment. Certainly the settlement of it is not yet in sight. But when the stupid observer wonders at the immense vitality in our day of the High Church, at the incredibilities which that section can believe and at the indiscreetness with which it can say, "Better disendowed and free than subsidized and bound," let him recall that in every age there has been power in a clearly articulated faith, and weakness in calculating compromise. Coleridge bade the Church believe in herself, take her creed about herself seriously, stand for her divine commission without those tactics which Disraeli so caustically called "bowing before Parliamentary Committees." And of this rejuvenated enthusiasm the Oxford Movement, with all its blundering, has reaped the merited reward.